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THE
NIBELUNG'S
RING:

A study of the inner significance of Richard
Wagner's Music-Drama.

By WM. C. WARD.

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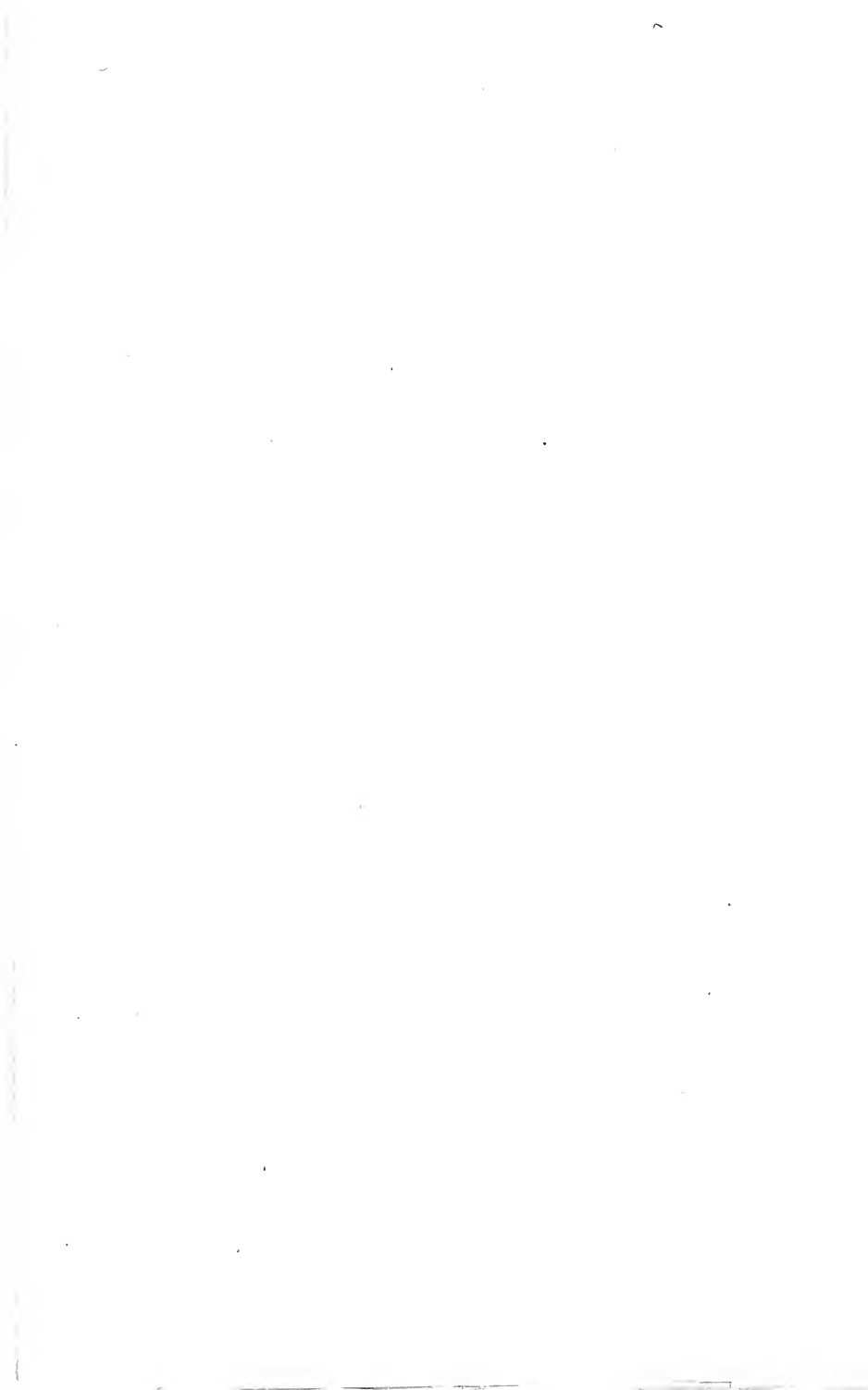
Preface.

The following essay appeared originally in 1889, in *The Meister*, a quarterly magazine issued by the London branch of the Wagner Society. It is now reprinted, with some modifications, in the hope that it may be found not wholly without interest for those of Wagner's admirers who care to penetrate beneath the surface, and to trace the profoundly philosophical conceptions which underlie his master-work of Art.

WM. C. WARD.

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The Nibelung's Ring :

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"It depends only on the weakness of our organs, and of our self-excitement (*Selbstberührung*), that we do not see ourselves in a fairy-world. All Fabulous Tales are merely dreams of that home-world which is everywhere and nowhere. The higher powers in us, which one day, as Genies, shall fulfil our will, are, for the present, Muses which refresh us on our toilsome course with sweet remembrances."—*Novalis*.

INTRODUCTION.

The contest between light and darkness forms the subject of innumerable myths, varied according to the circumstances and character of the nations among which they were developed. But the great myths of antiquity may be rightly interpreted in relation to more than one plane of existence, and by no means solely, or even chiefly, in relation to the physical plane. The actual origin of mythology is lost to us in the distance of pre-historic time, but as far back as we are able to trace it there seems little reason to doubt that it possessed a spiritual significance. Questionless, to our ancestors of the early myth-making ages the wondrous sights and sounds of the phenomenal world appealed with a force foreign to our own jaded minds. From an intense sensibility to the life and movement of nature they endowed the objects of their wonder with all the attributes of

personal and sentient beings. The earth, the water, and the air were populated with hosts of living creatures who, to the qualities proper to the objects of which—or rather, of the life in which—they were personifications, added the passions and emotions of humanity. Yet perhaps at no period to which we can point was the resemblance between the external life of nature and the inner life of the soul of man wholly unrecognised, and the most ancient myths may be held to symbolize, on their different planes, both the one and the other. Their physical interpretation—as of the sun dispelling the darkness of night, or awakening the earth from its wintry slumber—remains valid in its own field as a part of the truth, and as itself symbolic of a higher truth. For the contest of light and darkness on the physical plane is but the counterpart of a similar contest on the mental and moral planes. Indeed, as an ancient philosopher has observed,* what is the visible world itself but a myth, suggesting by sensible symbols the truths of that invisible world in which existence is not phenomenal, but real—the world of Mind and Soul?

But, from many causes, it often happens that the mythological traditions of antiquity which have been handed down to us, have reached us in a form differing doubtless considerably from that in which they were primarily conceived. In the course of ages the original meaning of a myth would become lost; the names applied to the various personifications, and once expressive of their various attributes, would no longer convey

* Sallust, *De Diis et Mundo*, c. III.

their original sense to a people whose very language perhaps had changed, but would become regarded as proper names merely. Poets would take up the materials already, it may be, unavoidably altered in passing down from generation to generation, and would mould them anew according to their own fancy or inspiration. Moreover, names borrowed from the old myths would, particularly when their meaning was forgotten, be bestowed upon mortal men, and the fame of their deeds, when the lapse of time had drawn before them a veil of partial oblivion, would be reflected back upon the myths themselves. Thus, for example, in the *Nibelungen Lied*, the old German version of the legend which supplied Wagner with the materials for his *Nibelung's Ring*, the original tradition has been so bedecked with stories of Mediæval chivalry and dim reminiscences of history, that, although it can still be partially discriminated, few of the pristine features remain. Wagner, therefore, for the materials of his poem, had recourse to the older and more primitive form of the story preserved in the Norse *Eddas* and the *Volsunga Saga*. It is believed, however, that the legend existed at a still earlier period in Germany, whence it was carried to the North, there to be adopted and secured when lost to its native land. But even here the root is not reached. The beginning of the immortal tale was doubtless shaped in that prehistoric age when our Aryan progenitors still dwelt in their Asiatic homes. When they separated and migrated the myth gradually assumed different forms with each branch of the race; and where the Greeks tell of the victory of

Apollo over the Python, of Hercules over the Dragon of the Hesperides, and many other stories, all symbolizing in various aspects the triumph of Light over Darkness, the Teutonic races speak of Siegfried's contest with the Serpent Fafner, or of Beowulf's slaying of the Fire-Drake.

But the investigation of ancient folk-lore is not our present object. Our task is to inquire into the manner in which Wagner has succeeded in connecting the old-time legend of his adoption with the life of our own day, its aspirations and beliefs; in re-animating it with a spiritual significance, true, not only for the past, but for the present and for all time to come—a significance, it may be, dimly adumbrated, it may be, in some of its principal features, clearly comprehended by the ancient seers who modelled in bygone ages the wondrous tale.* But this, at all events, is beyond our scope. It suffices us to know that by the genius of Richard Wagner, the inner meaning of the great Teutonic legend was for the first time brought home to the heart and made intelligible to the intellect of the nineteenth century.

The true subject, then, of the *Nibelung's Ring* is the gradual progress of the human soul, its contests, its victories and defeats, and its ultimate redemption by the power of Divine Love. We find the same idea underlying antecedent works

* It should be noticed that although Wagner has, in the main, followed the great outlines of the Norse legend, he has modified them wherever it seemed desirable, in order to express more clearly his thought; also that the drama is filled with significant details, often introduced or applied with a purpose entirely his own.

of the author, although in the *Ring* more than elsewhere it is consistently developed into a history of Humanity from the earliest dawn of individual consciousness to the final attainment of a purely spiritual existence. In one of Wagner's earliest music-dramas—the *Flying Dutchman*—we may trace the germ of the idea which is here carried out in all the maturity of his power. The storm-tossed seaman, long striving amidst failure and despair on the wild ocean of human sin and suffering, reaches at length his promised goal, and finds his release in the purifying influence of Love. Again, in *Tannhäuser*, it is Love Divine, —here personified in Elizabeth, as before in Senta— which works the salvation of the sinner, and causes the leaves and blossoms of renewed life to shoot forth from the brand, burnt and blackened with the flames of Hell. Lastly, in the *Nibelung's Ring*, as I trust I shall be able to show, we have a poem of which the main purport is distinctly allegorical, and which is built upon a deep foundation of spiritual truth. Few artists have been so consistently faithful as Wagner to the principle which he himself proclaimed, —that “Art has fulfilled her true mission only when she has led to comprehension of the inner sense by ideal presentment of the allegorical form.”*

*Wagner, *Religion and Art*.

PART I.

THE RHINEGOLD.

Das Rheingold is the title which distinguishes the first portion of our drama, to the remainder of which it forms a prologue wherein are sown the seeds which hereafter, like the Colchian Dragon's teeth, produce so abundant a harvest of strife and discord. It is not divided, like the three subsequent parts, into acts, but into four scenes of considerable length, connected by the music, which is uninterrupted from beginning to end. The first scene is laid at the bottom of the Rhine. This famous river, with whose name is interwoven so large a section of German legend and romance, is here employed as a symbol of the water-element, which again, as often in the Aryan mythology, is regarded as a type of the material universe, the sphere of all generated life. It thus corresponds with the earth-encircling Oceanus of the Greeks, which Homer describes as the origin of all things (*Iliad*, xiv., 246). In the songs of the *Edda*, indeed, we meet with a different conception of the cosmogony, but recent researches have proved that the former idea was at one time no stranger to the Teutonic peoples. It has been shown by Mr. Karl Blind that a Vana-cult, *i.e.*, a worship of the Vaenir or water-deities, preceded, among the Teutons, the religion of Odin and the gods of Asgarth. The *Elder Edda* (*Völuspá*)

contains a brief and obscure allusion to the fierce struggle which took place between the two creeds, and in which the older faith finally succumbed, yet was not wholly uprooted, a compromise being effected by which certain of the Vanic divinities were received into the circle of the Aesir. Of these Vaenir two have been introduced by Wagner among the *dramatis personæ* of the *Nibelung's Ring*—Froh (Freyr) and Freia, the children of the sea-god Niord. Many evidences of this ancient water-worship still survive in popular tradition. I need but instance the well-known story of the Fisherman in the collection of the brothers Grimm.

The three Rhine-daughters are simply personifications in human form of the Rhine, or water-element, and their names—Woglinde, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde—contain a reference to the flow and undulation of water. Their laughing play about the glistening treasure may be interpreted as an indication that the opening of the drama is laid in that Golden Age of the poets, when, as is sung in the *Völuspá*, the Gods knew not yet the greed of gold, and possessed the metal but as a shining toy. In the *Völuspá*, as in the *Nibelung's Ring*, it is the fatal thirst for gold (metaphorically speaking) which puts an end to this period of peace and serenity, and brings war and death into the world. But as in every individual life the whole great world-drama is re-enacted, so to each of us the days of childhood are the Golden Age, the Eden from which we pass, eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge; and thus by Wagner this golden spring-tide of life is suggested in the childish play of the Rhine-maidens, and in their

child-like heedless chatter, betraying with innocent carelessness the fatal secret.

We come now to an object upon which turns the entire tragic development of the fateful story, and which gives its title to the preliminary drama, the contents of which we are at present endeavouring to analyse. This object is the *Rhinegold*, the wondrous treasure whose lustre illumines the gloom of the watery depths. Those who are familiar with the Norse poetry will not have failed to remark the continual metaphorical use of such phrases as "the water's flame," "the ocean's fire," and the like, significative of gold; and again, in the *Edda*, when Oegir, the sea-god, gives a banquet to the deities, his hall beneath the waves is described as lighted with gleaming gold in place of fire. The origin of these phrases is perhaps connected with the ancient view of the cosmogony before alluded to, which regards the sea as the parent and giver of all things. This belief in the inexhaustible wealth of the sea is of frequent occurrence in legends and folk-lore. Thus in the *Younger Edda* Niord, the sea-god, is said to be "so rich and wealthy that he can give broad lands and goods to those who call on him for them."

In the *Nibelung's Ring* the Rhinegold, sleeping by turns, and by turns awakened by the Divine Intelligence (the "Wakener"), indicates the activity of the human soul in its pristine purity. By its sleep is signified the essential conjunction of the soul with its divine source, in which aspect its activity is said to sleep as regards the lower plane of existence; sleep here denoting transcendency. By its illumination of the waters is intimated

its essential and sinless activity upon the lower plane, diffusing life and light in the material world. But into this condition of innocence and tranquillity enters a disturbing element. As Evil from the darkness of Matter, rises Alberich the Nibelung from the lowest depths of the Rhine. His efforts at first are futile : the universe, as a whole, is exempt from the power of ill. It is only the individual soul, involved in matter, that Evil, sprung from matter, is mighty to degrade. This connection of the soul with matter is indicated by the wakening of the Rhinegold within the waters. Its illumination of the material world is an essential function, and of itself implies no degradation. But when Alberich seizes the gold, and drags it down from its rightful place, the universality of the soul is lost. The curse which the Nibelung pronounces upon love severs, as far as it may be severed, the bond which binds the soul to the highest Good ; its pure and universal energy, filling the world with light and joy, is now perverted into base self-seeking—Egoism—which becomes henceforth, as embodied in the Ring, the type of material might and mastery, although at the cost of spirituality and Divine Love. Thus the light of innocence is withdrawn from the world, and replaced by the darkness of guilt ; nor shall the atonement be completed until selfishness and sensualism be eradicated from the soul, and the light of love and holiness re-illumine the realms of existence. Alberich's curse of love strikes the keynote of the whole poem, which becomes a record of the strife between the two opposing principles, Love and Self, which constitutes man's mortal life.

The second scene of the *Rheingold* introduces us to the world of the Gods; the forms, that is to say, in which the human mind embodies its ideas of the ruling powers of the universe. Wotan, Fricka, and the others, here represent not merely the Northern Divinities, from whom their names are borrowed, but all religious creeds whatsoever that have held sway over the human race; and Wotan himself, as the typical figure, symbolizes the Power of Creed.

Let us here permit ourselves a brief digression in order to consider the reverent and appreciative sympathy which Wäagner displays for the faiths of mankind, as typified in Wotan. By these faiths are begotten and nourished the noblest thoughts of man, until, hardening at length within their self-imposed limits, they appear no longer as aids to the development, but as barriers to the expansion, of his mind. It is Wotan who, in conjunction with the all-knowing Earth-mother, Erda—may we say Religious Belief in concert with the Law of the Universe?—produces the race of Valkyrias, in whom are symbolized all noble passions and emotions which elevate the soul. It is Wotan again who begets the Wälsungs, types of the heroic principle in man, by whom he is himself finally overcome, when his ways have wandered from truth, and Erda warns him no more. Here also I would indicate a passage, replete with significance, from the last act of *Siegfried*, wherein the poet gives clear expression to his belief that in our creeds lies hidden the germ of the highest, although they are unable to bring to perfection that which they have half unconsciously nurtured. Brünnhilde,

the Spirit of divine Truth and Love, is made to say :—

“by me alone
was Wotan's thought conceived.
The thought that never
I dared to name ;
which I did not think,
but only felt ;
for which I fought,
struggled and strove ;
for which I braved
him who thought it ;
for which I suffered,
punishment bound me,
since I did not think it
and only felt .” *

Wotan's secret aim is, indeed, the redemption and purification of the human soul, but the freedom to accomplish it is denied him. It is Brünnhilde—Love—who “did not think it, and only felt,” by whom the conception of the God is fulfilled, though at last in opposition to his will.

To return to the second scene of the *Rheingold*. We find that already the disturbing element of selfish Desire, by which hereafter the doom of creeds is brought about, has entered into the world of the Gods. Its introgression here is typified by the building of Walhall, the symbol of selfish sway for their race, and of parallel significance to the Ring, in the lower sensual sphere of the Nibelungs. Wotan has ratified with the Giants, Fafner and Fasolt, a compact by virtue of which the latter are to erect for the

* I translate quite literally, aiming only at rendering the sense of the original as clearly as possible.

Gods the castle Walhall, and to receive in return Freia, the goddess of love and beauty. The original suggestion of this scene is to be found in the *Younger Edda*, where a certain smith of the giant kin bargains to build a burg for the Aesir, and he shall have, as his hire, Freia and the Sun and Moon. In the Eddaic Songs the Giants are huge elemental beings, older than the Gods, and their home—Riesenheim, Giant-home, the Old Norse Jötunheim—is in the region of ice and snow, lying far in the North beyond the great mid-earth ocean. Wagner speaks of them as “they who once ruled the world, the towering race of Giants,” and the *Edda* relates how of the Giant Ymir’s body the earth itself was formed. They represent then the chaotic condition of the primæval world, barren and unproductive, ere yet the beneficent Gods, their constant enemies, had sent the fertilizing showers and the ripening warmth of the summer sun; and thus in our poem these uncouth beings may be regarded as an appropriate type of *Ignorance*, and the bargain by which the Gods are bound to them denotes that inevitable period in the history of all creeds when, by the aid of man’s ignorance, they commence to set limits to the exercise of his free thought, and to assert an absolute and dogmatic rule over his mind. This limitation is suggested by the walls of Walhall. But hereby is determined the doom of creeds; their freedom has departed, and the bond that binds them to ignorance, although it give them temporary power, is the cause of their downfall when the human mind at length breaks the shackles of credulity and superstition. Runes of Bargain are

cut in Wotan's spear-shaft, as a token of this unenduring sovereignty over humanity.

Another, or rather a continued, parallelism is to be noticed in this scene ; for Wotan's renunciation of Freia, as the price of Walhall, corresponds exactly with Alberich's renunciation of love to obtain the Ring.

But Freia is the life of the Gods : the Goddess of Love is the emblem of spiritual life. It is she who feeds them with the golden apples of everlasting youth ; deprived of her they are already dying, and it is therefore evident that means must be found of recovering her without delay. The Spirit of Hypocrisy now steps in to the aid of the troubled deities. This is Loge, the Fire-element, the Norse Loki. In the *Edda*, as in the *Nibelung's Ring*, he appears as an embodiment of evil, a liar and a mocker, the Mephistopheles of Northern mythology. There, as here, he is represented as the sometime associate of the Gods, afterwards confined by them in punishment for his treachery and maleficence ; and as in the *Völuspá* he fares against the Aesir on the great day of their doom, so in the *Götterdämmerung* Walhall, with its host of deities and heroes, is finally consumed in Loge's flames. It is by Loge's counsel that Wotan has made the evil compact with the giants, and it is under his guidance that the Gods, having once set their feet on the downward path, proceed thereon with fatal celerity. Sent to search the earth for aught that may be offered to Fafner and Fasolt in place of Freia, as of greater value than love and beauty, he narrates the story of Alberich's theft of the gold, and instils into the minds of Gods

and giants a lust for the delusive treasures of the Nibelung. By him led, Wotan descends into Nibelheim, and with their departure the second scene is brought to a close.

The red glow of furnaces and the ringing of anvils distinguish the third scene as laid in the abode of the Dwarfs or Nibelungs. The Niflheim—Nibelheim, the home of mist or darkness—of the *Edda* is the subterranean domain of Hel, the Goddess of Death ; a realm of gloom and sadness, inhabited by the souls of those whose unhappy fate has forbidden them to fall in battle, and thereby to deserve the joys of Walhall, and the companionship of Odin and the Aesir. In the *Nibelungen Lied* the land of the Nibelungs is a terrestrial region, populated, like other lands, by ordinary mortals, and the Nibelung's Hoard is simply a vast treasure, the property of its King Nibelung, and guarded by his servant, Alberich the Dwarf. Now the dwarfs of the *Edda* are beings whose work it is to penetrate the hidden recesses of the earth, and to forge the metals contained therein. The treasure produced by them is the Nibelung's Hoard, the measureless wealth preserved in a dark cavern by its owners, the Children of the Mist ; and Wagner has therefore fairly identified these Nibelungs with the dwarfs, and given the name of Nibelheim to the subterranean home of the latter. Again, the dwarfs of the *Edda* belong to a class of elementary beings—the Elves—who are broadly divided into two kinds, Light-elves and Dark-elves or Dwarfs. Of the latter Wagner makes Alberich the ruler ; his name Alberich, or Elberich, signifies simply King of the Elves, and is connected etymologically with a name well

known to us—Shakespeare's Oberon. The Light-elves properly are the dwellers in Elfhome, the abode of the Sun-God Freyr (Froh). But as the entire Northern mythology, roughly speaking, is in some sense a record of the contest between light and darkness, Wagner has applied the appellation of Light-elves to the whole race of the Gods, and in one passage speaks of Odin (Wotan) as their ruler by the name of Light-Alberich, in opposition to Black-Alberich, the King of the Black-elves or Dwarfs (*Siegfried*, Act I, sc. 2.).

With Wagner, I believe, the Nibelungs are an embodiment of the entirely material and sensual part of humanity. By the virtue of the Ring, Alberich has become their prince, and at his bidding they "rifle the bowels of their mother Earth for treasures, better hid;" and forge therefrom, with unceasing labour, the baneful Hoard of the Nibelung. Or, leaving the language of mythology—by the power of selfishness the Spirit of Evil turns to its own ends every base and carnal instinct of human nature; while by the Hoard are symbolized the paltry objects of worldly covetousness, with special reference to the greed of gold.

The *Tarn-helm*—literally Helmet of Concealment, from an old German verb *tarnen*, to conceal—which Mime forges for Alberich, is used in our poem as an emblem of deceit. In the *Eddas* and the *Volsunga Saga* mention is made of a "helm of terror," which Siegfried (Sigurd) discovered in Fafner's hoard, after the slaying of the latter; but no further reference to it occurs. In the *Nibelungen Lied*, however, the *Tarnkappe*, or

cloak of darkness, plays an important part. Here also it forms one of the treasures of the Nibelung's Hoard which comes into the possession of Siegfried, and here, as in Wagner's poem, it is employed by Siegfried in the winning of Brünnhilde for Gunther. It possesses the properties of rendering its wearer invisible, and of endowing him with twelve men's strength. The Tarnhelm is a favourite subject of Aryan myth and legend. In the *Iliad* it appears as the helmet of Hades, wherewith Athena hides herself that she may take part, unseen, in the battle against Troy (*Iliad*, v., 845). Out of the dark nether world the "daughters three" of Hesperus procure it for Perseus, that by its aid he may overcome the dreadful Gorgon. And lastly, it is the cloud wherewith the Homeric Gods envelope their favourite heroes, the veil wherein Khriemhild, in the *Heldenbuch*, wraps her betrothed Siegfried, to withdraw them from the adverse fight.

Already, then, we perceive in our poem the presence of three opposing principles. First, the Gods, representing the higher, or spiritual, development of human nature;* secondly, the Giants,—the element of mere ignorance; and thirdly, the Nibelungs, the lowest or sensual element, becoming actively pernicious under the influence of the Spirit of Evil,—Alberich. Then we have the Spirit of Deceit,—Loge, the pretended friend

* I do not, of course, intend to suggest that in these Gods is embodied the height of spiritual wisdom, attainable only through their downfall; but the creeds of even the rudest people may be regarded as embodying so much of spiritual knowledge as the minds of men in that state are capable of.

and actual destroyer of each in turn, the giver of evil counsel to the higher powers, of capacity for active evil to the lower.* It is the fire of Loge which heats the Devil's furnaces, wherein at his bidding our baser impulses are ever forging the noxious and illusory temptations of the material world (see Loge's address to Alberich, *Rheingold*, sc. 3). It is Loge who enkindles in our higher nature the wasting flames of ambition and vain-glory, whereby the noblest expressions of human thought, the religious creeds of all ages—here symbolized in Wotan and the Gods—become gradually corrupted, until their vitality has perished, and they are ultimately consumed in the fire of their own self-deceit, to be replaced by a purer faith—the religion of Infinite Love. And finally, the Ring, by virtue of which all the evil is wrought, represents the perversion of the soul's activity from universal to separate and selfish aims. It stands thus for selfishness, egoism, the beginning of all crime in the material world, and corresponds with Walhall, the emblem of selfish power and sovereignty, and the consequent seed of downfall in the spiritual world.

Alberich's tyrannical rule over the Nibelungs denotes the bitterness and restlessness of her dominion whose wages are Death.

At the stage at which we have now arrived, the Gods already have obtained, by the aid of man's ignorance, an undue supremacy, symbolized in the fortress Walhall. Undue, we will call it, because it is to be distinctly understood that the Gods are not here intended as types of the Eternal

* In the deepest sense, sin is always a consequence of self-deception:

Verities, but only of those limited ideas of the motive powers of the universe which proceed from the human imagination ; and therefore when they—when any religious creeds—commence to enclose themselves within the Walhall walls of dogmatism, and to impose these limitations upon the minds of their votaries—as what creeds do not?—the hours of their existence are already numbered, and the day of their doom is surely, if slowly, approaching. The loss of their freedom, the bond that binds them to ignorance, is their actual death-warrant, whatever temporary power and unreal splendour it may lend them. The “Runes of Bargain” in Wotan’s spear-shaft mark his present sovereignty at the price of ruin hereafter.

The next step displays the desire of mere worldly aggrandisement on the part of Religion. From Alberich Wotan extorts the fatal treasure, that by its means the empire of the Gods may be assured. But the attempt is vain, and proves at best but a delaying of the doom. In Alberich’s hand the Ring was an emblem of material might, the Hoard and the Helm were the means of his mastery :—egoism, desire of wealth, hypocrisy, are the tools wherewith the Evil Spirit fortifies himself in the heart of man. But with these in the possession of the Gods the case is widely different ; they are then no longer a source of strength, but of destruction. Alberich’s curse is on them. To none but him shall they bring profit, but wherever they come the curse shall cling, until either the Devil regain his hold, or the Ring be purified and restored to its original sinlessness in the waters of the Rhine.

We enter now upon the last scene of this preliminary drama, a scene wherein the Deities, by a reluctant concession, secure a fancied immunity, but in reality a brief respite, from their impending destiny. In assuming Alberich's sceptre the Gods renounce their own ; retaining the treasures of the Nibelung, Freia is lost to them for ever. But the possession of Freia is, as we have seen, essential to their very existence. Nourished no longer by her golden fruit, they wither and decay like sapless leaves, when autumn yields to winter : they have no choice but to ransom her, even at the cost of their ill-gotten riches. Now the giants also covet the evil treasure. They are opposed alike to the Gods and to the Nibelungs, as ignorance is at war with both spiritual and material knowledge. In the first place they aim at extirpating the Spiritual by taking Freia from the Gods ; but afterwards, as material advantage seems always the more real to ignorance, they willingly accept the treasure in exchange for her. The Gods thus gain a new lease of life, but the curse, once incurred, clings to them in spite of their renunciation, and, in the words of a German commentator, " this deliverance is but in seeming ; the Goddess of Youth indeed, but not youth itself, is regained."

The Wala, who rises from a rocky chasm, to chaunt her mysterious warning to Wotan, occurs in several of the Eddaic poems. As in the *Nibelung's Ring* she is introduced under the name of Erda, so also in the *Edda* she appears as the slumbering Earth, who bears hidden in her womb the seeds of all life, and hence, as the wise Wala, she knows the secrets of futurity. The

origin of the word Wala—or Völva—is unknown : it signifies *prophetess*, and, it has been suggested, is possibly connected with the Greek *σιβυλλα*—sibyl. Among the old Germans and Norsemen a belief in witchcraft, in incantations, and in the gift of second sight, was very prevalent. Wise-women or Valas were wont to fare the country round, from one homestead to another, working spells and foretelling the future. Such a one was the Veleda of Tacitus (*Germania*, 8), who was held as a divinity by the Germans. The most important poem of the *Elder Edda*, the *Völuspá*—Vala's soothsaying—is placed by its author in the mouth of a Vala, who tells to the sons of men tidings of the dawn and dusk of the world. But the archetype of these soothsaying women, the Ur-Wala—primal Vala—of Wagner, was the Earth, from whom all life springs and unto whom all life returns, the dead woman whom Odin's incantation calls up from the grave to reveal the secrets of the coming time (*Elder Edda*, *Vegtamskvidha*), the Gaia of the Greeks, to whom honours were paid as the “ first prophetic power ” (*Æschylus*, *Eumenides*, 2). As foretellers of fate the Valas held a position related to that of the Norns or Destinies, the Moiræ of Northern Mythology, and Wagner has therefore appropriately represented the latter as the daughters of the Wala, Erda. Thus, too, we find, among the various traditions respecting the origin of the Moiræ, one in which they are regarded as the offspring of Earth and Ocean ; while again, Themis, the Goddess of Law, who, in a passage of Hesiod, is described as their mother, may fitly be compared, as an Earth-born prophetic divinity, with the Erda of Wagner's poem.

The first-fruits of Alberich's curse appear when the Giant Fafner slays, for the Ring's sake, his brother Fasolt. As Fafner departs from the scene, Donner, the Thunder-God, purifies with a violent storm the sultry, fog-laden atmosphere ; then, as he calls on his brother, the Sun-God Froh, the sun bursts forth in its splendour, while its rays are reflected in the rainbow-bridge, over which the Gods now pass in solemn procession into their fastness. The conception of this bridge is derived from the *Edda*, and includes, I believe, a reference to the swift passing away of their glory and power. The Wala's warning that a day of doom is impending over the Deities has sunk deep into Wotan's mind, and has there given rise to a new resolve, which is for the present indicated only by a musical theme from the orchestra, and by the introduction, for the first time into the text, of the name "Walhall." This resolve, which hereafter we shall see carried out, is to strengthen the dominion of the Gods by the creation of the *heroic principle* in man, and by filling Walhall for its defence with the souls of slain heroes ;* the souls, that is, of the brave of all ages, who have put their trust in, and striven to uphold, dogmatic creeds.

The battlements of the fortress glitter in the light of the evening sun, and a lingering lament over the loss of the sinless serenity of the Golden Age is heard in the sweet song of the Rhine-maidens as this prologue of the drama ends.

* The word Walhall means the Hall of the Slain in battle:

PART II.

THE VALKYRIA.*

The Ring and Hoard of the Nibelung are now in the possession of the Giant Fafner, who, in the form of a monstrous dragon, lies like Darkness brooding over them in his cavern in the wood, knowing and recking nought of their virtues. To despoil the dragon of his treasure is the instant object of both Wotan and Alberich; the latter hoping that by its means he may effect the overthrow of the Gods, and Wotan that by securing it from the grasp of the Nibelung he may avert the catastrophe. In other words, with the commencement of *Die Walküre* we enter upon those dark stages of ignorance and brutality in the history of man, wherein, although the vices of selfishness, avarice and hypocrisy are as surely existent as in more polite periods, yet the material ascendancy, which these have it in their power to bestow, is obviated by the vacuous condition of the savage and untaught mind. This state of being is, as it were, negative, profitless alike for evil and for good, and therefore to convert this condition of stagnation into one of activity which he may direct for his own advantage, is the problem which

* The Chooser of the Slain, from Icelandic *valr*—the slain in battle, and *at kjosa*—to choose.

now lies before both the Spirit of Evil and that of Religious Belief. But, as we have seen, the sovereignty of dogmatic creed is based upon its compact with ignorance, and thus by the former the victory over ignorance can never be completed ; by the bargain whose Runes are written on his spear-shaft Wotan is withheld from wresting the Ring from the dragon. For this purpose a new principle must be created—the heroic principle in man, already suggested at the close of the *Rheingold*. Wotan now perceives that the victory is to be accomplished only by the soul which is free from the restraints of creed :—

“ One only might dare
to do what I dare not :
a hero, to help whom
I never inclined ;
who, a stranger to the God,
free from his favour,
unconsciously,
without bidding,
of his own need,
with his own weapon,
should accomplish the deed
which I must shun,
which my counsel never had shown him,
though my wish was for this alone.”

(*Die Walküre*, act II., sc. 2.).

It is to be noted that Wotan is represented as foreseeing and longing for the triumph of Truth, although himself unable to bring it about, and even doomed in the end to oppose it. In the *Edda* also Odin possesses a two-fold nature. As Lord of the air he is God equally of summer and of winter, and in the latter character he occasionally

appears, as hereafter in our poem, acting in hostility to his own offspring, the short-lived summer sun of the North. Wagner has, as we see, preserved this duality of character in Wotan, while attaching to it a further spiritual significance. Wotan's opposition to the truth is contrary to his own secret conviction. He is the Conscience of Creed: in him are typified the innermost veracity and profoundest thought of religious beliefs, begetting in the soul those aspirations which accomplish the end forbidden to the creeds themselves, and which by that very deed give the death-blow to the latter, when their inner meaning has become obscured in the gathering mists of fiction and formality. Mythologically, these aspirations are represented by the heroic race of the Wälsungs—Sigmund and Sieglinde, the twin brother and sister, children of Wotan, and their son Siegfried. The heroes with whose souls Walhall is filled, that by them may be defended the bulwarks of dogmatism, are of course quite distinct from the Wälsungs, whose might is in their freedom from the restraints of creed. The former are not bodily introduced into the drama, except in the third act of *Die Walküre*, where the corpses of "Wittich the Irming" and "Sintolt the Hegeling" are seen lying across the saddle-bows of the Valkyrias as they ride from the fight. A hint of the mutual hostility which so frequently animates religious sects is conveyed in this scene, when, as the sisters alight, one suggests that the horses which bear the bodies of these heroes should be tethered apart, lest the known enmity of the dead warriors should infect them.

It was a custom with our Teutonic ancestors to erect their rude dwelling-houses around the trunk of a tree, which served as a central support to the edifice. Of this fashion is the house of Hunding, in which the first act of *Die Walküre* passes. But besides this allusion to an ancient custom there is a deeper significance in Wagner's employment of the ash-tree as the house-prop of Hunding. It refers to a singularly beautiful conception of the old Norsemen, by whom the universe itself was symbolized as the mighty ash Yggdrasill, whose roots tend downwards deep into the kingdom of Death, and whose topmost branches, wet with mist, wave high above heaven. A perception of the unity of all life is embodied in Yggdrasill,—a perception, moreover, of the perennial growth and renovation of things. As the tree from the darkness underground, so life springs from death; and as year by year after the passing away of winter's frosts the tree buds and blossoms anew in vernal beauty, so after the dreadful day of doom the earth shall arise from the engulfing waters fairer than before, and Gods and men shall live new lives, bright with the gladness of the Golden Age restored.

In the house of Hunding is typified the world of ignorance and barbarism. Night is drawing onwards, and a wild storm ending in dying mutters of thunder and gusty pattering of rain, as Siegmund enters hurriedly and sinks exhausted on the hearth. The incessant toils and rebuffs of the aspiring soul in its long contest with the powers of evil, its passionate yearnings, its flashes of joy ever again overclouded by the darkness of despair, are depicted in the words and music of this and

the following scenes. Siegmund relates the sad story of his troubles and misadventures. Misfortune lies upon him : whithersoever he turns he is fated to encounter but enmity and strife. Finally he narrates how, being called on for aid by a maiden whose kinsfolk were forcing her to a loveless match, he slew many of the foe, yet at **the last**, overpowered by numbers, wounded and weaponless, he saw the maiden slain, and took refuge in flight. This maid, we may fancy, is the human soul in its first antagonistic impulse against the limitations which oppress it. But the soul is not yet prepared to pursue to the utmost its daring rebellion ; it sees only confusion and despair as the consequences of its act, and stands wavering, appalled and remorseful. The rebellious feeling is slain, and the enthusiasm which supported it, exhausted by its premature effort, is compelled to await, once more in concealment, another opportunity for its assertion.

In the love of Siegmund and Sieglinde we recognise the mutual longing and attraction of the Male and Female elements of the soul. The union of this twin brother and sister, the children of Wotan, parted by the power of ignorance and barbarism, is in the end inevitable, because the one without the other is incomplete;—the masculine element, the active, progressive, must be joined to the feminine, the receptive, intuitive, to form the perfect spirit of Humanity. Their recognition of each other after long striving and suffering symbolizes the gradually awakening and ever increasing consciousness of the soul, bursting through the clouds of ignorance and doubt, and

finding its completion in the union of the two elements in Siegfried, the entirely free human soul. Only, moreover, at the moment of union and recognition is the sword *Nothung*—offspring of Distress—given into Siegmund's grasp. It is the musical theme which represents this sword that we hear in the final scene of the *Rheingold*, when the idea of the creation of the heroic principle first shapes itself in Wotan's mind ; and the sword itself, left in the ash Yggdrasill by the God for his son, who alone possesses the power to wield it, symbolizes the *Spirit of Heroism* or *Heroic Resolve*, which afterwards in Siegfried's hand smites asunder for ever the sceptre of Wotan.

The dark and brutal side of human nature, opposed to lofty thought or noble sentiment, and against whose enmity and tyranny the Wälsungs are ever contending, is typified in Hunding and his kindred. That their nature is closely allied to that of the Nibelungs, or embodiments of the purely material and sensual element, is plainly discovered by the similarity of the musical themes relating to the one and the other. But what they lack in spirituality they supply with superstition. Hunding is especially "Fricka's Knecht,"—Fricka's servant—Fricka being, as we shall presently see, the type of formality in religion.

With the commencement of the second act we are introduced to a new character—Brünnhilde, the Valkyria. By her and her eight sisters are symbolized the lofty passions and emotions which elevate the noble soul, and urge it continually onwards in the pursuit of the Ideal. They are

here represented as the daughters of Wotan and Erda, inasmuch as they are enkindled in the human breast by the religious or spiritual instinct in conjunction with the Law of Nature. But as with the old Norsemen the most esteemed attribute of the soul was valour, so we find the Valkyrias mythologically portrayed as the Storm Spirits, who give strength and endurance to the heroes, who aid them in their battles, and who finally transport their souls to Walhall, there to sit and revel with Odin until Gods and heroes together perish on the day of his downfall.

The most prominent of the sisters is Brünnhilde, the Spirit of Divine Truth, and thus of Love, of all Truth the divinest. Her Wotan instructs to assist Siegmund in the impending fight between the latter and Hunding. Hitherto Wotan has figured as the father and protector of the hero ; for of all creeds in their youth the influences are helpful and ennobling ; and, indeed, the first downward step, the building of Walhall, was taken by the God in ignorance of its fatal consequences :—

“ Unwittingly fraudulent
 I wrought untruth,
 bound by bargains
 what hid in it harm .
 with cunning Loge misled me.”

(*Die Walküre*, act II., sc. 2) :

But the changing point now approaches. It is symbolized in the dialogue between Wotan and Fricka, who at length prevails upon the God to renounce and betray Siegmund to his death. Fricka appears as the protectress of the unhallowed

marriage-bond between Sieglinde and Hunding, and broadly, therefore, as the enforcer of the observance of external forms, without regard to the animating spirit, deserted by which the forms themselves remain no longer expressions of vital truth, but empty and lifeless ; and her unhappy success in this critical contention denotes the gradual veiling of the "pure azured Heaven" of Religion with the mists of formality, a process which has been exemplified with more or less completeness in the case of every creed known to the world. The character of Fricka, now fully exhibited, is suggested in more than one passage of the *Rheingold*. Wotan's wish for extended sway she shares no more than she comprehends his need of the free hero, who shall do of his own might what the Gods may not accomplish. When Loge is telling of the wonders of the Rhinegold (*Rheingold*, sc. 2), her question is characteristic :—

" Would the golden toy's
glittering jewel
serve also women
for fair display ? "

Doubtless the "fair display" of ritual and ceremonial. To her Walhall is desirable, not as the strong fortress whence the world may be ruled, but as the fair dwelling-house whose walls shall confine Wotan to her side, and hinder his wide wanderings, his begetting of restless Valkyrias and bridleless Wälsungs. The Valkyrias, indeed, are working as yet in accordance with her will ; men's minds must be raised to the level of their creeds before they are prepared to soar to altitudes of freer comprehension. But the period has

arrived when the mind refuses longer to submit to the restrictions of formal Religion. The Wälsungs have offended against Fricka's law, and Wotan yields to her indignant demand that he withdraw his countenance from the luckless pair. He accordingly reverses his doom, and bids Brünnhilde fight for Fricka's vassal. But the Spirit of divine Truth, hitherto obedient, becomes now hostile to the decaying power of creed: the Valkyria rebels against Wotan's will, and ranks herself on the side of the struggling and advancing soul. Siegmund's fall, however, she is powerless to prevent. The victorious hero who, strong in his freedom from the bonds of creed, shall come of the Wälsung stock, is yet unborn. Siegmund is bound to the God, begotten and nurtured by him; his very sword, the heroic passion of the soul, is a gift from Wotan. Again, the musical theme which accompanies Siegmund's first entrance into the drama is allied to that relating to the Runes of Bargain cut in the spear-shaft wherewith Wotan rules the world; and by this resemblance it is suggested that the soul, in its yet undeveloped and, as it were, blindly groping condition, is still confined by old forms and creeds, by ignorance and superstition, from which the heroic mind is even yet unable to achieve its liberation. Thus is Nothung, in the hand of Siegmund, shivered upon Wotan's spear, and it is only when forged anew by the free Spirit of Humanity—Siegfried—that it becomes trenchant enough, in its turn, to sever the shaft, or, in other words, to break forth to the light through the shattered bonds of circumstance and tradition.

His sword broken, Siegmund falls dead at the hands of Hunding. Yet though the progressive instinct has for the present succumbed to the power of superstition, even in its fall it is not without victory. Hunding expires at Wotan's nod immediately upon the death of his antagonist; the rule of blind, brutal superstition is actually at an end, although it seems for the moment triumphant. And finally, notwithstanding that the active fiery energy of the heroic soul is temporarily overthrown, its vitality is still latent in the suffering Sieglinde, who bears in her womb the coming Liberator of Humanity.

The third act opens with the famous scene of the Valkyrias, who appear in lightning-flashes, galloping like rushing storm-winds on their way to Walhall with the slain warriors, and greeting each other with wild laughter and cries like the neighing of horses. The strong and noble souls who in all ages are found supporting the cramping limitations of dogmatic creed, and opposing, with honest though mistaken zeal, the growth of true freedom, are, as I said before, typified in these slain warriors, the champions of Walhall. It must not be forgotten, however, that these heroes, in common with the other characters of the drama, are types of principles, not of persons. Though there is probably no one in whom exists not some germ, however undeveloped, of the Walsung spirit, yet so many noble minds there are thus pitifully misdirected, forging new fetters in place of lightening the old! The true nature of their connection with Wotan is elucidated by the following passage from

his discourse to Brünnhilde (*Die Walküre*, act II., sc. 2) :—

“ through you Valkyrias
I meant to avert
what the Wala caused me to fear——
a shameful end of the Gods.
That strong for the strife
the foe might find us,
I bade you bring me heroes :
whom in masterful wise
we held in our laws,
the men whose courage
we had controlled,
whom through cloudy bargains¹
deluding bonds
to blind obedience
to us we had bound——
you now were to spur on
to storm and strife,
provoke their strength
to rough contention,
that troops of hardy champions
I might gather in Walhall's hall.”

Brünnhilde has saved Sieglinde : she herself awaits now the doom of Wotan. To her sisters she appeals in vain for aid ; they pity her, and seek indeed to shelter her from Warfather's tempestuous wrath, but in her daring revolt they take no part. Thus faith in creeds, even when abandoned of the spirit which was their essence, is in no wise inconsistent with feelings the most noble and most elevated ; nor, however hopeless the task, will the walls of Walhall want devoted defenders and constant champions until the day of their downfall has arrived.

The last scene of *Die Walküre* symbolizes the final separation of creed from the Spirit of Truth

which has hitherto been its vital support. It is Brünnhilde who has been the worker of Wotan's will ; she who, with her sisters, has filled Walhall for his behoof with souls of warriors and heroes. In other words, the sway of religious belief over humanity has been maintained and extended by means of the spirit of devoted earnestness and veracity which lay at the heart of it. But all is now changed. The faith which once gave birth to and nourished the noblest aspirations of humanity has now lost sight of truth in a maze of external forms and trivialities. The Spirit of Truth is forced to rebel, and the divorce of truth from falsehood, of earnestness from formality, is completed when Wotan solemnly renounces Brünnhilde, and sentences her to unbroken sleep until a hero shall awaken her who is "freer than he, the God." At her own request her sleep is fenced around by the fierce flames of Loge, which can be penetrated by him only who knows not fear ; for truth is indeed hard to discover, and he alone is worthy of her who can pierce unsinged the devouring fire of falsehood, and to whom every obstacle is but an incentive to further endeavours.

The stage at which we have arrived at the close of *Die Walküre* may be thus briefly expressed :—

1. Creed for ever divorced from veracity : the transient apparently triumphant for a time over the permanent.
2. The human soul as yet unable to vanquish the powers of superstition and ignorance, and temporarily overwhelmed by them.
3. The Spirit of Divine Truth hidden from the

view of the soul in fire-girt slumber, until such time as the soul, by its own vital force, shall have broken the chains which now bind it, and shall have attained the ability to awaken her.

PART III.

SIEGFRIED.*

The third division of our drama opens in the cavern of the dwarf Mime, situate amidst the gloomy wood wherein Fafner, in the guise of a monstrous dragon, watches the hidden hoard. To this wood Sieglinde, directed by the Valkyrias, has come with her unborn child, for here alone, in the dark abode of Ignorance and Atheism, will she find a refuge from the persecutions of creed; and here, dying, she gives birth to the hero Siegfried. The boy is left to the sole care and nurture of Mime, the Nibelung. As we saw before, the Nibelungs are types of the lower and purely animal part of human nature, and in Mime the smith is embodied at once all the baseness and the cunning of mere animalism. He directs the development of Siegfried's lower nature, but fails utterly of moulding him to his will. The divine parentage of the youthful hero shows itself in strong inarticulate impulses, and he displays for the dwarf an ever-increasing disgust and aversion. These higher instincts are as yet fed only by the contemplation of external nature. He is yearning for knowledge,

* Siegfried—explained by Wagner as “*der durch Sieg Friede bringen soll*,”—he who through victory (Sieg) shall bring peace (Friede).

yet the weapons which Mime forges for him to compel the secrets of nature he feels are useless—they break in his grasp. The food of materialism he casts aside: it cannot satisfy the soul's hunger. But the wonders of creation, the shining brook whose "molten crystal" mirrors back to him his own image, the happy birds with their nestlings, even the wild wolves and foxes with their tenderness for their offspring, all nurture in the ignorant but aspiring soul those instincts, as yet dumb, which constitute one of the great proofs of its immortality. Above all arises in him a need of love. 'Tis the affectionate solicitude of the wild creatures for their young that stamps upon his mind the deepest impression. He longs to develop the mystery of his birth, for already he recognises that Mime is not akin to him. He sees that the young resemble their parents, and how unlike he himself is to the mean shambling dwarf, the sight of his own reflection in the stream has taught him. Under the influence of such feelings he extorts from Mime a portion at least of the story of his birth and parentage, and forces him to surrender the broken pieces of his father's sword. Thus the soul has so far gained the mastery over its lower nature that a faint conception of the higher spiritual life begins now to dawn within it.

In the second scene Wotan appears in a character familiar to us from the Norse poems and Sagas—as the Wanderer, namely, who traverses with unwearied feet, for good or for ill, all regions of the earth. Certain lines which are here placed in his mouth I will venture to cite as an additional testimony on the part of our

author to the helpful and beneficent influence of creeds in particular stages of human progress :—

“ Much explored I,
much discerned :
matters of weight
could I make known to many,
from many turn
what caused them trouble,
gnawing distress of heart.”

And again :—

“ Many wrongly
deemed themselves wise,
yet what they needed
knew they not ;
what availed them
I revealed to their asking ;
reward they found in my word.”

Against Wotan Mime is now tried in the balance, and sees “ his mounted scale aloft.” The formal conception of this scene is derived from the Lay of Vafthrudnir in the *Elder Edda*, where Odin, disguised as Gangradr, the Wanderer, visits the hall of the giant Vafthrudnir, and the two contend with question and answer, as in our poem, their heads being pledged on their success. In the *Edda*, as in the modern poem, Odin is triumphant. Before Wotan, as symbolizing the spiritual nature, the lower carnal nature has to own itself vanquished ; but to Wotan, as the representative of creeds, the fruits of the victory are denied. He but announces to the dwarf his doom at the hands of a hero to whom fear is unknown.

The third and last scene of the first act contains the reforging of the sword Nothung, the symbol, as we have before noticed, of the heroic will. Mime’s secret purpose with regard to

Siegfried is to procure by his means the death of Fafner, and the transference into his own possession of the Nibelung's Hoard and Ring. He knows already that the dragon can be slain only with the sword Nothung—that ignorance is to be overcome alone by the spirit of heroism and valiant resolve; but he knows not who shall reforge the indurated steel which he himself has striven in vain to weld. By his failure to solve this question he has incurred the penalty of death at the hands of him who knows not fear, while yet, as Wotan has foretold to him, by none can Nothung's pieces be welded anew save by the same dauntless hero. The dwarf is thus in a dilemma: to Siegfried his life is forfeit, yet if, before slaying Fafner, Siegfried acquire the knowledge of fear, his hopes of obtaining the sovereignty of the world are for ever demolished. Mime, therefore, while Siegfried is busied with the sword, develops a plan, by means of which he despairs not of surmounting his difficulties. The young Wälsung, he determines, shall slay the dragon for him, and thereby release the treasure from the black cave of ignorance in which it yet lies, pent up and profitless. Meanwhile he, Mime, will brew from poisonous herbs a stupifying draught, which he will present to Siegfried as if to refresh him after the fight, and when the hero, by its effect, shall have sunk in death-like slumber, Mime will hew his head from his shoulders with Nothung itself, and reign for ever lord of the world and its wealth. This envenomed potion, last attempt of the carnal nature to subdue the soul, may be taken to symbolize the intoxication of mere animal indulgence,

wherein the mind bends even its own noble qualities to the pursuit of base desires, and thus may be said to sink to its own destruction. It recalls to us the "man-transforming medicine" of Circe,

"whose charmed cup

Whoever tasted, lost his upright shape,

And downward fell into a grovelling swine."

At the opening of the second act Alberich is discovered watching by night before Fafner's cave. He, as we saw before, is hoping still to regain the Ring, that by its virtue he may again bring mankind under his evil sway, and even "storm Walhall's heights with the host of Hel." Hither also comes Wotan, the wanderer, he also hoping, but against hope, to re-establish, through Siegfried's conquering sword, the dying despotism of creed. But Alberich attempts in vain to beguile the dragon of the Ring. His cunning, his threats of approaching danger, are of no avail: to another is the victory destined.

Day dawns as Siegfried and Mime enter upon the scene. The first struggle is before the young hero. Hitherto all his nobler feelings are but vague instincts. He rests beneath the lime-tree, watching the growing light, hearkening to the songs of the birds, but all unconscious of the meaning of the strange impulses which stir his soul. That he hates Mime he knows indeed, yet the reason of this antipathy he comprehends not; he feels only an instinctive disgust at the baseness and foulness of the dwarf. He lies yet, as a poet has expressed it,

"Con blancas alas ligadas

A las rocas de la carne."

The wings are there, but, bound in the shackles of ignorance, he knows not how to use them. All that he has yet learned has been in the development of his lower nature.* Mime has shown him where the cave of ignorance lies, and *his* work is here finished. Ignorance once conquered, the soul must either set itself free from its fleshly bondage, or, as Mime hopes, succumb to it entirely, the spiritual falling an easy victim to the animal nature. But this is not the fate prepared for it. In the fearlessness of youthful strength Siegfried slays the dragon, and no sooner does he taste Fafner's blood than the bird's song falls with new significance on his opened ears. Instructed by the bird, he enters the cave, and takes thence the Ring and the Helm, unconscious yet of their evil properties. The treasures of the material world he leaves, but the lordship thereof is bound up in those which he carries away. Meanwhile the brothers Alberich and Mime are quarrelling over the soul which each has destined for his prey. Knowing naught of his new enlightenment, they expect only that the glittering hoard will attract his childish sense; that, ignorant of the wondrous virtue of the Ring, he will set no store by its possession. Their hopes, however, are doomed to disappointment, and Alberich for the present abandons the game,

* The soul, being born into the material world, is forced by necessity in the first instance to familiarize itself with its new conditions. It therefore develops first the faculties of sense, by which it is correlated with the sensible world, and only by slow degrees attains (or rather, regains) the exercise of the higher spiritual faculties which belong to its true origin and essence.

while when Mime, presenting the "baneful cup," unconsciously confesses his treacherous design, the Soul, now fully awakened, becomes aware of the baseness and perniciousness of the carnal nature, and with one blow of Nothung strikes him dead to the ground. Then rolling the corpse of the dwarf into the cave where yet the hoard is lying, he blocks the entrance with Fafner's body, and leaving thus the debasing clogs of brutish animalism and of worldly greed together hidden in the darkness of ignorance, whose veil is now however lifted for all loftier purposes, he follows the voice of nature, no longer ambiguous, along the upward path of virtue and nobleness, towards the rock whereon is sleeping the fire-fenced Truth, the holy Love whom he alone may awaken.

The original suggestion of the opening scene of the third act is to be found in the Lay of Vegtam, in the *Elder Edda*. Wotan invokes the Wala, Erda, in order to question her as to the fate of the Gods, if their downfall may yet be averted,—if the rolling wheel of destiny may be stayed. But his spells avail him nothing; Erda cannot counsel him now. Her waning wisdom denotes the approaching end of the old order of things, of the old earth; the end that no power can turn aside; and Wotan confesses his innermost desire, the secret will that is in religious creeds, though overlaid by ever-increasing wrong—that the rule of the Gods may indeed cease, and that Siegfried and Brünnhilde—the soul fully emancipated by love—may succeed them, and redeem the world. The Wala disappears, and Siegfried enters, Wotan awaiting him. The bird that has

led hither the young hero takes flight, and is seen no more. Thus far has he come, guided by his own free natural impulse : his further direction he would now learn from religious creed. He questions Wotan, but obtains from him no helping response. Against the guiding bird the God breaks out into fierce wrath, as formal religion holds ever in disgust the free instincts of nature, deeming them no better than rebellion against its own lawful dominion. Another noteworthy passage in this dialogue is that in which Wotan speaks of the eye that he has lost, by whose light Siegfried now sees. This eye Wotan left in the well of the Norns, and in payment therefor he got Fricka to wife, and the sovereignty of the world. It may therefore betoken the half of the God's divine wisdom lost when true religion was narrowed into cramping creed, and it is thus said that the light which he lacks is the illumination of the unfettered soul.

With the spear on whose shaft Nothung once was shattered, Wotan strives in vain to bar Siegfried's way. The sword, wielded by the free hero, smites asunder the spear, and crying "Go onward : I cannot hold thee," the God vanishes, and Siegfried plunges joyfully into the flames which are now seen blazing around the Valkyria's rock. Piercing the ring of fire, he finds himself in bright clear daylight, Brünnhilde lying asleep before him. He lifts first the helmet and shield which cover her, her coat of mail yields to the sharp edge of heroic resolve, and in soft womanly garments the fair Truth lies beneath his entranced vision. But even yet she is not his. The soul, in presence of its long-sought

Ideal, trembles and faints, and hardly dares to grasp it ; he knows, for the first time, fear. At length he nerves himself, and with a kiss awakens her, devoting himself for life or death to the Ideal, the Divine Love, for ever unattainable at lesser cost.

As before in the love of Siegmund and Sieglinde, so here again, in that of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, is symbolized the soul's recognition of itself, though now in fuller and freer measure. "Thyself am I," Brünnhilde exclaims : "thyself, if thou lovest me : what thou knowest not, I know for thee ; yet I am wise only because I love thee." And now, surely, all is accomplished ; the soul's energy, in conscious accord with its true essence, shall progress ever onward in the exalted region of pure spiritual life. But alas ! the atonement is not perfected ; the curse on the Ring clings yet to its owner. Despite Brünnhilde's warning and entreaties, the purely spiritual love which she offers will not suffice the hero. The clogs of earth still fetter the noble soul, and Love herself must share his degradation, must become a mere mortal, and surrender all to her conqueror.

PART IV.

THE DUSK OF THE GODS.

The word *Götterdämmerung*—Dusk of the Gods—is the same as the Norse word *Ragnaröckr*, used by the Northern people to denote that terrible day when the Aesir and their enemies shall meet on their last battlefield, to perish at each others' hands. Of the many noble conceptions which mark the religion of our forefathers, none is more profound or more sublime than this of the *Ragnaröckr*—this feeling that the very Gods, as they imagined them, were, after all, but for a time; that, sooner or later, their end would come, when, having fulfilled their appointed task, they would pass away and give place to something yet higher and holier. There is a beautiful passage in the *Völuspá* concerning the resurrection of the world, and the happy future when all evil shall cease, and Balder, the young Sun-God, slain by Hödr, the Power of Darkness, as Siegfried by Hagen, shall return to dwell for ever in the heavenly halls. But what the old poet vaguely surmised, is here, in the *Nibelung's Ring*, declared with clear comprehension: the religion of Love shall succeed the vanished creeds. Into this all-sufficing certainty Wagner has interpreted the obscure intimations of the *Edda*.

The last day of the great drama is prefaced by a scene which, for solemn beauty and grave

dignity, yields to none in the entire work. Upon the earth is still the darkness of night, lightened only by the red flame which, in the background, flickers round the Valkyria's rock. The three Norns, tall female forms veiled in dark falling drapery, sit spinning the thread of human destiny, and singing in alternate songs the story of the past, the present, and the future. These are the time-goddesses, the daughters of Erda, born to weave the weirds of men after the loss of the happy, timeless, Golden Age. Their names in the Norse mythology are Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld, and they sit, according to the *Edda*, by the well of wisdom that flows from the roots of Yggdrasill, the world-ash. Winding the thread about the branch of a fir, Urd sings of the days of old, when the leaves grew green on the wide-spreading branches of Yggdrasill, and the holy fountain murmured full and clear in the cool shade. She tells how Wotan drank from the well, leaving an eye in requital, and how he cut from the ash a branch as a shaft for his spear. But when Wotan thereby assumed the sovereignty of the world, when the spiritual became contaminated with material aims and ambitions, the free growth of the universe was stayed. In the lapse of long ages the ash withered, and the spring dried up, and Urd no longer spins her thread by the green emblem of the young world, but by the gloomy fir-tree, symbol of its dark and sorrowful age. The second sister, Verdandi, now takes up the song, and tells how Siegfried has smitten asunder the God's sceptre, and how Wotan, in despair, is preparing for the end, —has bidden Walhall's heroes fell Yggdrasill. She, in her turn,

binds the thread to a sharp rock, from which, as from the old world, nought can grow. But Skuld, the youngest sister, taking the thread, casts its end behind her : the future is beyond her ken, therein the time-goddesses will spin no more. She tells how the felled tree has been piled in heaps around Walhall, and how, ere long, fire shall seize the wood, and consume the Gods and their abode in one mighty conflagration. Now Urd again lifts the thread, but her sight is dim, and dazed. Verdandi then sings of Loge, the fire-demon, how, by his spear's enchantment, Wotan tamed him, and set him to guard Brünnhilde's rock ; how creeds, the natural foes of hypocrisy, yet press it into their service to their eternal destruction. Again, Skuld tells how Wotan kindles his broken spear at Loge's flame, and how he casts the fire among the hewn piles of the ash ; and yet once more the eldest sister takes up the thread and the song, but in vain. The night of the Norns is fading, their knowledge is passing from them.* (The Nibelung's curse

* Fate is the power which connects all things in the material world in an endless sequence of causes and effects. The soul is subjected to this power only so far as it deserts its own higher life to identify itself with the life of the body, and thus renders itself a sharer in the body's passivity. For, as Plotinus tells us (Ennead III. I. 8), the soul itself is a principle and a primarily efficient cause (*πρωτοσυγὸς αἰτία*) ; and this applies not only to universal soul, but to every individual soul. "When it is without body, it is wholly its own mistress, and free, and independent of the cosmic cause [*i.e.*, Fate] ; but when carried into body, it is no longer mistress in all things, since it is co-ordinated with other things." The true function of the individual soul

weakens the thread, and as Skuld draws it forcibly towards her, it breaks in the middle. Binding themselves together with its severed pieces the sisters vanish, to return no more.)

The day, which has gradually dawned, now floods the scene with brightness, as Siegfried and Brünnhilde come forth from the rocky chamber. The human soul, weak and fallible, cannot yet consent to abide for ever in the pure light of the Ideal. Siegfried longs for change: he forsakes Brünnhilde to rove among the toils and temptations of the world. But Brünnhilde herself is no longer the same as of old. In yielding to Siegfried, in linking herself with humanity, she too has become liable to its failings and self-deception. Her love is great as ever; but it is no longer the pure, unerring, spiritual love, but human and erring. She has become a woman, with a woman's strength and weakness. She

in relation to matter, is to inform and vivify that which is beneath it, in harmony with the universal Soul; shining in the darkness of matter as the Rhinegold in the midst of the waters; yet never forgetful of its true essence and its universal relation, nor descending to share the passivity of the body to which it gives life. The darkness of matter, then, is the Night of the Norns; fading wherever a soul casts off the bonds that bind it to the body; renewed wherever a soul falls into material life.

It is, perhaps, superfluous to point out that what is here said of the fading night of the Norns, the felling of the world-ash, and so forth, is not to be understood as implying an actual end of the world in time, but must be interpreted in relation to the individual soul. The world is said to end as regards the soul, when it is indeed the soul that has transcended the dominion of Fate, and risen superior to the illusions of the world.

has opened to Siegfried the stores of her heavenly wisdom, but he comprehends it not. The brightness of the Ideal dazzles his unaccustomed eyesight ; he cannot remain in her lofty sphere, but he can degrade her to his own. His pledge of love, the Ring which he places on her finger, is a symbol of this degradation of the divine to the earthly, and this emblem of the earthly selfish nature she will henceforward cherish as the representative of its owner, Siegfried. Alberich's curse has as yet glanced harmlessly from the youthful hero, strong in the armour of innocence, and unconscious of the fatal properties of the treasure which he has won. Now, however, following the promptings of his energetic, heroic character, he departs to new deeds in the world of phenomena, where at length he will acquire the fatal knowledge with all its tragic consequences. One last gift Brünnhilde 'bestows upon him—her horse Grane, in which is symbolized the Valkyria-nature, the ardent impulsive spirit which will carry its master undaunted over the most arduous paths of life.

The first act of the *Götterdämmerung* opens in the hall of the Gibichungs on the banks of the Rhine. Here, then, is that world upon which Siegfried is about to enter. Gunther (Lord of War) is the representative of worldly honour and glory, his sister Guttrune of worldly grace and beauty. Closely allied to them is their half-brother Hagen (thorn), the active, aspiring spirit of evil in the world, whom Alberich has begotten as a counterpoise to the heroic race of the Wäl-sungs. He appears as a gloomy, prematurely aged figure, ashen-pale of countenance, a hater

of joy, a master of guile and intrigue. Already under Hagen's influence these confederates are weaving the net in whose folds the unconscious hero is to be entangled. The heroic human soul must become the prize of Gunther and his sister in the first place, but in the end of Hagen alone. His devotion to his love must be lost in the draught of Oblivion which Guttrune shall present to him. To her, the transitory beauty of the world, he must transfer the allegiance which he has hitherto preserved to the eternal beauty of the Ideal. And this cherished Ideal itself, the holy Love which is his soul, he must betray for the sake of the glittering unrealities of mere worldly glory and delight. He must renounce Brünnhilde to Gunther, the spiritual to the earthly, the Eternal to the Temporal. Yet are Gunther and Guttrune not of themselves evil. The former appears as a chivalrous, gallant warrior, drawn against his will into the sad coil of treachery and crime; while Guttrune, at least towards the end of the drama, awakens in us no little sympathy, in the tragic result of her act of deceit. They are, in fact, but puppets of which Hagen holds the strings; worldly honour, worldly delight, are but the baits wherewith the evil spirit tempts his intended victim. Indeed, Gunther and Guttrune are themselves, like Siegfried, of heavenly origin, for their father Gibich (the giver) is but a type of Odin (Wotan).

But now are swift resolutions translated into deeds as swift. Siegfried appears, learns for the first time, from Hagen, the evil uses of the Helm of Deceit, accepts unwittingly from Guttrune's hands the Lethæan draught, loses his heart to the

fair seducer, binds himself to Gunther in bonds of brotherhood, and lastly, departs with the latter for Brünnhilde's rocky home, that by completing there the tragic renunciation he may win Guttrune to wife.

The scene then changes to the Valkyria's rock, where Brünnhilde sits absorbed in joyous contemplation of the fatal Ring, Siegfried's seal of love. To her her sister Waltraute makes the last vain appeal on behalf of the old creeds. In Walhall's high seat Wotan sits in gloomy silence, holding the splinters of his shattered spear. Around him is gathered for the last time the council of the Gods and Heroes. For the last time he has sent abroad his ravens, Thought and Memory, to gather tidings of the doom of the Gods. I have before noticed the dual personality of Wotan, representing not only the formal, ephemeral, character of creed, and as such doomed to perish with the other Aesir, but also the actual truth hidden beneath that formalism, and made immortal in the persons of his descendants, Brünnhilde and Siegfried. It is in this latter character that he now whispers, as in a dream, the secret of the world's redemption—the restoration of the Ring to the sinless daughters of the Rhine. Hearing his words, Waltraute has hastened to Brünnhilde's rock, to implore her sister to perform the saving deed. But this cannot now be done for the sake of the Gods. To Brünnhilde Waltraute's words are wild and devoid of meaning, and she declares that the Ring, as Siegfried's pledge, is more to her than the weal of Walhall and all the Gods. The fatal spell is on her, and she will not renounce the world for Wotan's

behoof. Uttering a cry of despair, Waltraute quits her, and fares on her cloud-steed back to Walhall.

With terrible swiftness the curse on the Ring now fulfils itself. Siegfried, disguised, by means of the Helmet of Delusion, as Gunther, bursts through the fence of fire, and forces the despairing woman to receive him, the supposed Gunther, in Siegfried's stead. He wrests from her finger the Ring which gives him the mastery over her earthly nature, and then shares her chamber, though parted from her by his drawn sword, until on the morrow he shall transfer her to the real Gunther, for whom Siegfried's treachery alone might serve to win her. Thus for the fourth and last time in this drama has taken place the tragic renunciation of love for the sake of worldly gain and glory ; Alberich's evil example has been followed by the Gods and by the Giants in close succession, and finally by Siegfried.

In the opening scene of the second act a dialogue between the sleeping Hagen and his father, Alberich, discloses to us the innermost working and striving of the powers of evil. Alberich knows that from Wotan he has no more to fear ; the free human soul has hewn asunder the sceptre of the old creeds, and it is now Siegfried alone against whom the Nibelung's machinations must be directed. As Alberich disappears the sun rises, and Siegfried enters. After describing to Hagen and Guttrune the success of his enterprise, the young hero enters the hall with his bride, while Hagen, with characteristic irony, calls together Gunther's vassals to greet the ill-matched couple who are even now advancing up the

Rhine. The glad shouts and clashing of weapons of the men give way to a scene of the most terrible concentrated passion, when Brünnhilde sees her false lover by Guttrune's side, and the whole truth of her betrayal gradually dawns upon her. Burning love is changed to burning hate, and it is only by the death of the hero that his falsehood may be expiated ; for the world's sake he has renounced love, and only by losing utterly the world can he be reconciled with her. But how shall vengeance be taken ? Brünnhilde's magic has made Siegfried invulnerable ; only to his back she has spared the spell, knowing that his back will never be turned to an enemy. Entangled as he is in the world's toils, false as he has proved to his ideal, the heroic soul is yet proof against all evil that may encounter him openly face to face. By treachery alone he may be smitten down, and in the back Hagen's spear shall strike him. He has done evil unwittingly, with a light heart he has trodden the downward path ; and now the consequences of his deeds are gathering round him, not to be averted. Outraged love and sin, with widely differing motives, desire equally his death.

As before to Brünnhilde, so now to Siegfried, a vain appeal is made to avoid the curse embodied in the Ring. The representatives of the sinless Golden Age, the three Rhine-daughters, appear to him in the beautiful opening scene of the last act, and beg him to restore the Ring to the sacred depths of the Rhine. He is at first half inclined to comply. The world's possession is a little thing to him, lightly to be bartered for the joys of innocence and peace. But these joys are not

for him ; he belongs to the world, and to the world's delights he is bound in bridal union. His very nobility of character here stands in his way. He knows not fear, and no dread of coming doom will induce him to part with the Ring which he so little values. The prophetic words of the Nixies fall on heedless ears, and they vanish down the stream, leaving him to his fate.

His fate is hard at his heels. Hagen, Gunther, and the hunting train now enter, and sit down to rest and refreshment after the toils of the chase. To them Siegfried narrates the story of his past life, and, as the recital approaches the subject of Brünnhilde, Hagen gives him again to drink of an enchanted potion, which restores his lost memory. In the last moments of life the soul again awakes to the truth which it had cast from it, but with that awakening the earthly life passes away. Wotan's ravens, Thought and Memory, hover above him, and, as he turns to mark them, Hagen's spear pierces his defenceless back. His sin, involuntary though it were, brings its due reward, and its reward is—death. For as sin is, so to speak, but a form of death, a dying of the soul to that holiness, or wholeness, which is true life, so is Hagen not merely the bringer of death, but in some sort a personification of Death itself. In the Norse poems the Sleep-thorn (Hagen means thorn) occurs as a metaphorical expression. Odin is said to strike the sleep-thorn into Brynhildr in punishment for her disobedience, and Hagen is thus the Thorn which strikes the last sleep into mortals. Among the old Germans a custom prevailed of burning the bodies of the departed on thorns.

Siegfried's dying words are significant of the new and truer life to which he is passing. In death his eyes are opened, and with the words "Brünnhilde bids me greeting," he expires.

In the hall of the Gibichungs, Guttrune, sleepless from vague forebodings, awaits her husband's return. Heralded by Hagen, the funeral procession now enters, the men bearing on a shield the hero's body. In this moment of his supposed triumph the evil spirit displays himself in the undisguised hideousness of his deadly character. Wrangling with Gunther for the Ring, with a blow he strikes him dead : worldly glory, once the instrument of his evil designs, falls at his hands. But when Hagen grasps at Siegfried's finger to draw therefrom the Ring, the dead man's hand raises itself threateningly and the baffled foe falls back among the horror-stricken crowd. As Siegmund formerly, now Siegfried is in death victorious. To complete the redeeming sacrifice, Brünnhilde comes, and in her noble death-song reveals the tardily-discovered aim and result of the entire tragedy. She stays Guttrune's piteous lamentation with the harsh (in seeming) but inevitable truth. The transient beauty of earthly things had captivated but for a little while the hero's soul ; it is Brünnhilde, the divine, ideal Love, to whom he is indeed bound in eternal bonds. But against Wotan her heaviest accusation is directed ; Wotan, who doomed Siegfried to death through his most valorous deeds, which yet the God himself had desired. For, as we have seen, the progress and enlightenment of the human soul is the idea which lies at the heart of all creeds, although outwardly they are fated to oppose it.

The renunciation of selfish desire is complete when Brünnhilde takes from Siegfried's hand the Ring, to restore it to its rightful place in the waters of the Rhine. By renouncing Love in the first instance, by installing Self in its place, the Ring was wrought. Formed from the lustrous Rhinegold, symbol of the sinless activity of the unfallen soul in its relation to the universe, it became, in the hold of Evil, an emblem of selfishness and worldly greed, a bestower of material power, a destroyer of spiritual light. The same activity which, in its pure relation to the universe, made all things to rejoice in the transmitted radiance of the Divine Cause, becomes, when contracted and turned to mere self-seeking, a source but of darkness and delusion to the soul itself and to the world. For its false gain all have lusted, and under its curse all have fallen. Even love itself, the noblest human love, has been dragged under its deadly yoke. But, taught by suffering, love is at last victorious. Brünnhilde renounces the fatal emblem. She, the spiritual, the Ideal, frees herself from the stain of the earthly, the sensual.

The destroying curse on the Ring finally fulfils itself in the annihilation of the evil spirit which fathered it; when Hagen, the last remaining embodiment of evil desire, is drowned in a vain attempt to wrest the gold from the daughters of the Rhine. Sin and death no more exist for the purified soul. Its egoism is eradicated, and it shines again in unobstructed union with the Soul of All. The gold has become once more a source of light and joy. Yet the end is not as the beginning. For the individual soul, it is not merely

innocence that is regained, it is wisdom that is gained. And as the crown of all wisdom, the glorious result of all these strivings and sorrows, the principle of perfect spiritual Love is attained, to become the true undying religion of humanity. The old Gods, the old Walhall, are destroyed, consumed in Loge's flames, the avenging fires of their own hypocrisy and self-deceit. But the truth which they have fostered, the good which they have given, and yet have striven against, remain for ever in their children, Brünnhilde and Siegfried, Love and Heroism, whose earthly part is consumed on the funeral pile, only that their immortal essence may become one for ever in free spiritual life.

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